

Chapter 6:

Determining Community Values

Why do you want to conserve wetlands in your community? By asking people in your area this question, you can determine if and how much the community values its wetlands. Assessing how your community values its local wetlands is an important exercise that will help your team focus its conservation efforts. For instance, you may find that local residents know very little about wetland benefits in general, in which case you may want to target your educational efforts toward addressing this deficiency. On the other hand, if residents are familiar with wetland benefits in general, you should spend more time and effort communicating about other things, such as describing the specific benefits that your wetland provides. Keep in mind that depending on their jobs, interests, and personal values, people will have many different levels of understanding and acceptance of wetlands and wetland issues. Also remember that how a community values its wetlands can change over time (hopefully, your efforts will cause it to change for the better!); therefore, it is important to re-evaluate these values often.

Ask (and Answer) the Questions

Here is a list of questions that you should answer as a place to start. The answers will help you determine which values are (or should be) important to your community. You may not be able to answer all of these questions without help from local experts. Be sure to explore all of these values to see if they apply to the wetland in your area. If no one ever has monitored the wetland, some of these values may be unknown and need further research.

Commercial/Economic Values

Does the wetland produce commodities such as timber, fish, peat, or shellfish?

Is the wetland a historic site or tourist attraction?

Is the wetland used for recreational purposes?

Flood Storage

Is the wetland in the headwaters of the watershed?

Is the wetland “lower” (downstream) in the watershed?

Is the wetland located in such a way as to keep floodwaters from reaching houses, businesses, or other development?

Groundwater Recharge

It is generally accepted that wetlands are sites of groundwater discharge (i.e., where groundwater moves laterally or upward to reach the surface). The reverse is also thought to be true that wetlands recharge the aquifers and groundwater systems that provide the water many of us get from our faucets. The groundwater recharge potential of wetlands is affected by many factors, including wetland type, location, season, soils, and precipitation. The recharge potential appears to be more important in small wetlands than large ones. Nationwide, wetlands are an increasingly important source of ground and surface water near large urban centers. Has the groundwater flow in your area been mapped? Do wetlands in your area provide water to a local aquifer?

Erosion Control: Channel and Shoreline

Is there a prominent river or stream that runs through your area?

Is the wetland associated with that river or stream?

Is the wetland located along a pond, bay, or lake?

Water Purification: Surface and Groundwater

Does the wetland filter surface water runoff?

Does the wetland trap polluted runoff or excess nutrients?

Does the wetland filter treated effluent from a wastewater treatment plant?

Aesthetic Values

Is the wetland the only green space and natural water feature in the community?

Is the wetland a study site for scientific research?

Does the wetland provide habitat for threatened and endangered plant or animal species, or species of concern?

Does the wetland provide habitat for mammals, fish, amphibians or reptiles?

Is the wetland part of a migratory bird flyway?

Do birds nest or feed in the wetland?

Does the wetland contain a unique or rare plant community?

Recreational Values

Is the wetland area aesthetically pleasing?

If not, could it become more visually appealing through a trash cleanup or restoration project?

Is hunting permitted in the wetland area?

Do people fish in the wetland or an associated lake or pond? Are the fish eaten or released?

Is the wetland accessible by canoe or other non-motorized boats? If so, are people using it for that type of recreation?

Are there areas for wildlife observation and photography?

Have nature trails been built?

Educational Values

Is the wetland part of a nature preserve, wildlife enhancement area, or county park?

Is there a nature center, interpretive trail, or informational bulletin board at the wetland?

Do school groups use the wetland area for educational purposes? Could they?

Is the wetland easily accessible? Is it accessible to people with disabilities?

Are there historical artifacts in or around the wetland?

Does the wetland have any cultural significance?

Existence Value

Many people feel a strong sense of stewardship for the natural world that regardless of economic value, all forms of life deserve respect. Many also believe that humans have a moral responsibility to maintain natural ecosystems for ourselves and for future generations. In addition, human understanding of the many values of the natural world is incomplete. Healthy wetland ecosystems may contain a treasure trove of as yet undiscovered benefits for agriculture, industry, medicine, and recreation. The best option for preserving this potential is to maintain the biodiversity present in healthy wetland ecosystems. Are there people in your community who want to see the wetland restored, conserved, or protected just because it is part of the natural ecosystem? Are there people in your community who want to see the wetland restored, conserved, or protected because of the future benefits it may provide to society?

Taking it to the Streets

After your team has a fairly good handle on the specific functions and benefits that your local wetlands provide, try to find ways to assess what your community thinks about the wetlands. Do they know about all the ways the wetlands benefit them? You might work with a local university social science department or with a marketing/research firm to conduct a survey. Or just do an informal poll at a shopping mall, local diner, or other place where “average” people congregate. The purpose is simply to get a handle on how people feel about wetlands and the level of their knowledge about wetland functions and benefits.

It will be a temptation to skip this step. You and your team could sit around a table discussing your own opinions about what “the community thinks,” and where to spend your time on outreach efforts. But your decisions will be heavily biased. Make an effort—even if it is not “scientific”—to find out what *other* people think.

The Limberlost Experience – What Do Local People Think?

Pilot Focus Area Coordinator Ken Brunswick describes a survey the Limberlost Team conducted to get a sense for how local residents felt about wetlands and wetland conservation.

In early 1998, we surveyed 22 local residents in the Limberlost Area. We mounted five groups of four 8" x 10" photographs to a board. Each group represented a different aspect of the environment:

- Group 1 Open space
- Group 2 Land use
- Group 3 Open streams
- Group 4 Forested areas
- Group 5 Wildlife

We asked residents to rate the pictures for favorite and least favorite in each group. A number was assigned to each reaction. We also asked for some basic demographic information, so when the survey was completed, we could assess how landowners differed from the other residents, how males differed from females, etc.

In general, respondents tended to respond positively to images that contained wildlife and to images containing forested areas. People responded very positively to the restored wetland in group 2. Group 3 (open streams) received the most negative responses, although the two elderly respondents enjoyed all of the images in this group. The images within each group receiving the most negative responses were a spillway (group 1), a farmed wetland with lost crops (group 2), a dredged stream (group 3), an open area in an early succession forest (group 4), and a muskrat swimming (group 5). Even farmers viewed the dredged stream in group 3 as unpleasant.

The fact that people gave high ratings to the restored wetland and low ratings to the farmed wetland with lost crops is reassuring to us. This gives us some sense that area residents appreciate our wetland restoration work.

Although this survey was not a controlled, scientific experiment, it does give a little more information about how some of the residents in the area feel about wetlands and other broad aspects of the environment. We can now move on to conduct additional surveys that are designed to gather more detailed information.

Results of surveys—scientific or anecdotal—will be a big help to your focus area team in deciding where to focus your time and effort.